

# SARANGI IN THE MODERN CONTEXT

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Suresh Vrat Rai

Perhaps none of the modern Indian musical instrument has so much relevance and significance in the modern context as Sarangi. Treatment of Sarangi as a modern instrument might appear controversial, particularly in view of its well known association since the origin of human civilisation and mention in the Sangeet Ratnakar and other ancient works nevertheless association of Sarangi with classical music and well established recognition is perhaps not more than three centuries old. Broadly speaking Sarangi in its original shape and form, still in vogue among some of the tribes in India and other parts of the world, can be viewed as the 'Mother', the origin, of string instruments. In this sense the modern Sarangi presents the latest modified and refined form of the original bow and bowing instruments in their crude form, that too perhaps without specialised technique.

Authentic historical account detailing the origin and development of Sarangi is not available. The anthropological study and excavations provide basis for inference. The anthropological conclusions are however not scientifically accurate, but do provide clue. The bow instrument known as धनुर्यन्त्रम् (Dhanuryantram) in vogue among the primitive tribes for hunting purposes, was also used for signalling the advent of the enemy. The tribals used to produce the reverberating grave sounds by pulling the gut string of the bow. We find descriptions in the Ramayan and the Mahabharat how mere grave sound of Sharang (the bow of Lord Rama) or Gändeeva (the bow of Arjun) indicating arrival of the two outstanding archmen of the age in battle field frightened and demoralised the enemy camp. Sole purpose of the harsh sound was either to alert or to cause terror, psychological defeat of the enemy. It is believed that this particular sound later inspired for designing and shaping musical instrument of primitive people for expressing rejoicing, with improvement in their living and taste. The curvature of the bow provided the idea of the method of constructing body of the instrument connecting both the ends with gut string. The primitive form of Veena, curved like body of a bamboo bow, looked more or less like the lyre or harp. Strings of the Veena were made out of the intestines of the wild animals. Bowing

technique was unknown. The primitive artists therefore used to play by plucking the strings of the bow with the fingers. The sound produced was however mono sweet and grave than the original harsh one. We also find triangle shaped instruments, similar to the ancient Georgia and Finland type of lyres. Two horizontal bamboo bars with a gut string fastened at both the ends used by the primitive men presented the instrument in its triangle shape. One can notice subsequent improvement, additions and modifications in structure, shape, the tonal qualities and increase in the number of notes produced. The anthropological research works indicate (*Dhanuryantram*) bow instrument as the origin of all the string instruments of the world including Sarangi.

Historically, we don't find the present classification and names of string instruments in the ancient works on Musicology. By and large all the string instruments were known as Veena, which was initially with one string (*Ektantri*) and with two strings (*Dvitatri*). The saptatantri Veena was a later development. Representation of musical instruments including Veena carved on the stone walls or engraved on stone slabs, wall paintings, in various temples and caves like the Buddhist Pitalkhora and Ajanta caves located in Aurangabad district, or stone slabs excavated from the debris provide interesting material for historical study. The representations of the musical instruments in ancient sculptures and paintings though not necessarily reflecting the exact sizes, shapes, position and method of playing, at best indicate the musical instruments in vogue during the particular age. Mention of the technical word *Saptadhatu* (सप्तधातु) in the context of Tantri Veena in the Rig Veda (10.32.4) is believed to signify the seven notes of that age produced by playing on the Veena. The sculptures of Gandhara (1st or 2nd century), Amaravati, Nagarjunkonda, Anuradhapuram (Ceylon) (2nd and 3rd century), Ajanta (2nd-7th century), Mahavallipuram (7th century) ie. testify to the popularity of Veena. Different varieties of Veenas find mention in the *Natya Sastra*, the *Nardiya Shiksha*, the *Brihaddeshi* and the *Sangeet Ratnakar*. Many of the post Sarangdeva musicologists mention Sarangi in some way or the other.

From the point of view of shape and structure, the ancient musical instrument without frets mentioned as Brahmi, Ghosvati (घोपवती), Ghosa (घोषा) or Ghosak (घोषक) Veenas can be viewed as the mother of Sarangi. Resonator of the popular instrument Ektara covered with skin might have inspired the musicians for moving in the direction of Sarangi. Sarangdeva (सारङ्गदेव), Nanyadeva (नान्यदेव), Sudha Kalash (सुधाकलश), Someshwar and Haripal have admired the Veena without frets. Leaving aside the shape and structure, sculpture, wall carvings, paintings in the temples and caves of the 6th to 13th century provide adequate evidence testifying existence of bowing instruments. The journey from the string instruments depicted in wall carving of the Vishnugupta temple of Bengal, other temples in Western India resemble Sarinda and Sarangi. Even the

several of present primitive races, tribes have rich tradition of bowing instruments. The sound box of these bowing instruments made of wood or coconut skin in crude form is neither refined nor with ornamentation. Some of these instruments may be mentioned. *Rāvaṇhatha*, popular in western parts of the country, *Kingri* in the Maharashtra and Andhra regions, *Kunju* in vogue in Kerala, *Pena* of Manipur, *Banam* and *Kenara* in Orissa and *Tangata* or *Tangatatona* played by some tribals.

Sarangi, though centuries old, initially represented folk instruments of the country. The single string instrument plucked with fingers was popular among the saint singers practically in all parts of the country. Ektara, Dokako are such instruments. The number of strings, invariably of guts, was gradually increased to two, three and four with a view to improve tonal quality of the instrument. The instrument Saran popular in Jammu and Kashmir with two steel and two gut strings, nineteen subsidiary strings (Tarab), and the resonator covered with sheep or goat skin resembles the present Sarangi. Among the folk bowing instruments may be mentioned *Ravana Hatha*, *Kamayaca Sarinda* or *Surinda*. The string instrument is also in vogue with the present name and shape in various regions of the country. The Sindhi Sarangi, the Jogia Sarangi, the Dhani Sarangi, the Gujaratan Sarangi, the Alabu Sarangi and some of the popular bowing instruments very close to Sarangi.

Detailed account of the पिनाकी Pinaki Veena in the Sangeet Ratnakar, the Sangeet Parijat, the Sangitopnisadsarodhar संगीतोपनिषद् सारोद्धार, as a gut string bowing instrument resembles the present Sarangi. The very nomenclature derived from the word Pinak i.e. bow suggests it as a bowing instrument. Description in the Sangeet Sara, also indicates the art of manufacturing bow with tail hairs of horse, use of wax. In the Aine Akbari, we find another instrument "Sur Vitan" similar to the Pinaki Veena. Detailed description of Nisank Veena निःशंक वीणा in the Sangeet Raj and the Sangeet Sara resemble Sarangi both in shape and technique, Ravanahasta रावणहस्त as detailed in the Bharat Bhasya, the Sangeet Sudha, the Sangeet Markand, the Sangeet Parijat brings the instrument very close to Sarangi.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the musicians had become familiar with Sarangi by 12th century. The Telugu musicologist Palkuriki Somnath in his work *Pandita Rādhyāya Caritam* while enumerating varieties of Veena also mentions Sarang Veena. It is however difficult to say with certainty that the Sarang Veena was actually the present Sarangi. One trying to find Sarangi in the Chapter on the musical instruments, in the Sangeet Ratnakar is disappointed. Sarangi actually finds mention in the concluding part *Prakirṇādhyāya* as *Sarangyālapini*. The instrument was perhaps yet to find place and recognition in classical music and was accordingly not mentioned in the main chapter on musical instruments. The

present structure, shape, number of strings, technique of playing Sarangi find detailed mention in the Sangeet Raj and the Sangeet Narayan.

The great musician Tansen specifically mentioned Sarangi along with other string instruments Veena, Venu, Kartar, Sarangi. It however appears from the verses of Swami Haridas, Kabirdas and Parmanand das that the Sarangi was mainly confined to religious and folk music. That is why, perhaps the artists favoured exclusive use of metal than gut strings.

Switch over of Sarangi to classical music has been a gradual rather than over night process. The modern Sitar, Sarod and Rabab appeared and gradually Veena went into background. These instruments were primarily meant for solo performance. Correspondingly the Dhrupad style was left behind by the newly emerged Khayal and Thumri styles. No instrument was available for effective accompaniment after Veena. Intrinsic qualities and potentiality of Sarangi might have attracted the artists. The instrument was widely used in the mehfils of professional dancing girls for decades. These mehfils presented classical as well as semi classical styles like Ghazal, Thumri etc. so as to cater to the taste of the patrons. The posture of Sarangi players was standing, that too mobile moving behind the dancing girl. Sarangi was fastened with the help of a cloth round the waist of the artist. Later the Sarangi players were allowed to sit in a corner. The status of Sarangi and its players continued to be humiliating. The music underworld activities and even flesh trade with the label of music in these dens added insult to injury. These accompanists were known as Dhari or Mirasi. Later Sarangi as such became synonym of these notorious dens and anti-social and immoral traffic rather than art. The stigma kept the artists away from the instrument for decades. In fact we have not been able to get rid of this stigma and response of the artists in this regard has not been encouraging. Sarangi is perhaps the only instrument without a single female artist. Whatever might be the factors responsible but the fait accmpli is in itself a challenging question mark in the present set up.

Outstanding intrinsic qualities of the instrument however, could not keep sarangi, a refined form of the folk or original Sarangi to suit the requirements of classical music, out of sight for long. In fact Sarangi is one of the richest and unparalleled instruments of the Indian Music. The ten characteristics of excellent musical manifestation enumerated in the Natya Shastra are visible so far as Sarangi is concerned. Some of the characteristics are melodious manifestation, capable of enchanting the listeners, aesthetic expression of moods and sentiments, wide range of notes, harmony of notes etc. It is not mere sentimental attachment or association with the past but critical examination that brings Sarangi at par in excellence with other instruments.

The seven fold tests of an excellent musical instrument suggested by

Dr. Barton are successfully applicable to Sarangi. These tests are Range and pitch of the instrument, internal relation of the possible notes, the power and delicacy of tones producible, change of intensity of the sound while they last, quality of sound and capability of simultaneously producing more than one note. By any yardstick or test Sarangi appears outstanding. Somehow the sound of Sarangi is very close to human voice. Unlike other instruments, Sarangi player is capable of accompanying to the nearest point of accuracy, it may be any style, Dhrupad, Khayal, Thumri, intricate styles like Tappa and light music. Rare tonal qualities, range, scope, fast oscillations (*Gamak*) usually difficult for bowing instruments, unbound potentiality of producing intricate permutations, combination and shades of notes, have elevated the instrument to the highest pedestal of honour in classical music despite the earlier stigma of association with the dancing girls and the consequent prejudice. It was not an account of compassion or any body's mercy but solely on merit and superb performance that Sarangi players entered the field of classical music. Veena was gradually given up. Sarangi became all the more indispensable as the only string instrument suitable for accompaniment.

We accordingly find galaxy of Sarangi players during the last one and half century or so. Some of them may be mentioned Ustad Alladia Khan, Ud. Bindu Khan, Ud. Ghulam Sabir, Sabri Khan, Ud. Haider Baksh, Pt. Siya Ji Maharaj, Pt. Saryu Prasad Mishra, Shambhu Nath Mishra, Pt. Sur Sahai, Ud. Badal Khan, Pt. Gopal Mishra, Pt. Ram Narain, Pt. Hanuman Prasad Mishra etc. Ud. Bindu Khan introduced new technique of Sarangi playing and covered one and half octave, Ghulam Sabir went upto two and half octave and Pt. Ram Narain apart from having introduced new technique of bowing and use of fingers for producing notes claims to have widened the range of Sarangi playing to four octaves.

The Sarangi players have however been mainly confined to accompaniment. The traditional concept of accompaniment and approach to such artists has not been congenial to free and healthy growth. As a matter of fact accompaniment is far more difficult than solo performance, where the vocalist is free to have his way according to his convenience and feasibility. Accompaniment on the other hand requires not merely presence of mind at every moment, extraordinary alertness, but also the capacity to reproduce without wasting a second, and on the other hand the art requires intensive training in vocal music and all the styles. Music is essentially an art of specialisation but the accompanist is supposed to be an all rounder transcending human capacity. The tuning and playing technique of Sarangi already happen to be more difficult than other instruments. Several Sarangi players were leading vocalists of their age.

The concept of accompanist as one just imitating the original style of the vocalist than mutual dialogue between the two artists providing new colours and shades of harmony has kept personality of the Sarangi player

subdued and just a second or third rate artist. The tradition has relegated place of the Sarangi players both socially and economically in matter of remuneration or performance fee. The recognition they deserved has been denied, ignoring excellent performance. The Sarangi players therefore could not develop independent personality or school. Excellence and merit of Sarangi player is judged strictly with reference to the Vocalists he accompanied. Mere accompaniment does not necessarily make the Sarangi player of the caliber of the artist. Moreover that can be one of the aspects of the artists performance but the real personality remains eclipsed. Objective norms of appreciating Sarangi playing are yet to be evolved. Faithful reproduction by the accompanist has been one way traffic. Extreme socio economic humiliation led several accompanying artists to switch over to vocal music in utter disgust. Some of the vocalists felt pride in narrating how they made the sarangi player helpless by intricate combinations and ultimately forced them to stop playing. The cock fight might have entertained feudal listeners but such concept is now outdated.

Introduction of Violin and Harmonium, thereby eroding the limited scope of Sarangi playing has added insult to injury. Some how Violin and Harmonium have been able to evoke wider response. Advocates of the two instruments have advanced sharp criticism of Sarangi. Some of the arguments are interesting:-

1. The resonating strings are so many that they take annoyingly long time for being tuned in correct intonation. Sarangi was perfectly all right in the olden days of Kings and Queens, when there was no hurry.
2. It is said that Sarangi can reproduce the exact tonal expression, meends and gamaks. Is exact reproduction at all necessary?
3. Every one or two seconds the bow of Sarangi must swing to the left or to the right and thereby must cause minimum disturbance to the melodic flow.
4. Sarangi hampers slow, gentle and leisurely movement of alap, due to inevitably swift movement of its bow.
5. When the artist is singing Tan Phirat (तान फिरत), Sarangi invariably becomes outrageously out of tune.
6. Sarangi, an instrument of old tradition as a supporter of classical, light classical and light vocal music is confined to few professionals.
7. Practice of Sarangi playing requires hard work i.e. riyaz and study.
8. Back part of the fingers of the left hand behind the nails get painfully

hurt on account of their constant rubbings on the string of the instrument. True, the fingers get gradually hardened and can later rub the strings up and down without any further damage to the fingers but the scratches on the fingers and the consequent pain in the initial stages serves as deterrent.

While advocating the cause of Harmonium and Violin, the supporters conveniently conclude. "There is every likelihood of the Sarangi also passing out of vogue like the Beena and Mridang.

(see the Art. "Hindusthani classical music-by Deshpande and Ratanjankar, Indian Musicological Journal, Baroda P/51-59, also reproduced in the Readings on Indian Music 1979.)

It is also argued that Sarangi is meant essentially for female musicians specially for light classical varieties such as Thumri and the like. Men of education and culture are not learning to play on Sarangi.

The arguments advanced in enthusiastic pleading for harmonium are obviously too funny, superficial and hypothetical rather than convincing. It might not be harsh to observe that the perverted approach and reasoning leads to negative and fallacious conclusions. The suggestion, who would devote hours after hours to the practice of Sarangi during these days of fast tempo is rather fantastic. There can be no short cut approach in music, which is essentially a penance.

Accomplishment in an art like music without dedication, hard and regular practice of years is like the non-existent Aleek Satya, like the Vandhyaputra in Philosophy. Even assuming, succession of the Sarangi has been seriously hampered during the last five decades leading to non availability of Sarangi accompanists, the argument advanced for giving up the instrument, it is all the more necessary to patronise, protect the instrument and the artists instead of leaving them to perish and disappear. The patients in alarming condition deserve greater care, attention of the physicians and devoted treatment.

Sarangi is well equipped with all the ingredients required for solo performance, which is absolutely essential for independent development of the artist's personality. Challenging erosion by other instruments make solo performance imperative. Ustad Bundu Khan introduced Sarangi solo performance successfully. Initially, the artist booked for accompanying was also allowed to present solo performance of short duration. His performance in conferences and disc records were widely appreciated by the listeners and critics. Ustad Bundu Khan was followed by other artists but they could not make significant headway. The Sarangi players could not find recognition as independent performing artists like other instrumentalists. Pt. Ram

Narain made a determined bid to introduce solo performance but the conservative audience could not appreciate and the very first performance proved a flop. The undeterred artist continued vigorously until he won tremendous applause two years later. Now we find concerts exclusively devoted to Sarangi recital. These concerts have earned unprecedented popularity in India and abroad, marking beginning of a new era in the history of Indian music. The critics and listeners are fastly developing a taste for Sarangi recitals. The popularity of such concerts bring a silver lining though one swallow does not make a summer.

Successful exploitation of Sarangi playing in applied music, orchestral compositions, background music, and film music have opened new avenues for the Sarangi players. The All India Radio provides jobs to Sarangi players. The so called inherent limitations of the instrument appear more as fiction or myth.

The real picture however is not so rosy as it appears. Exceptions do not constitute the general law. Basic problems remain the same. The traditional Sarangi players feel poverty and starvation as their destiny and therefore discourage the younger generation from learning Sarangi playing. Ustad Chand Khan and Usman Khan, the descendants of the renowned Sarangi player Ustad Mamman Khan switched over to vocal music. Similar was the case with Abdul Wahid Khan, disciple of the famous Sarangi player Ustad Haider Bux, Ustad Ameer Khan, Ustad Abdul Karim Khan, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, who were initially eminent Sarangi players but later adopted vocal music, giving up Sarangi. Socio economic condition of the sarangi players in various places like Banda, virtually begging on foot paths, is alarming, that is why the eminent Sarangi players of the age prefer to bid good bye to their ancestral and traditional instrument. Pt. Baij Nath Mishra has finally drawn the curtain, in regard to Sarangi, even music as profession. His sons are working in other departments. The sons of Pt. Hanuman Prasad Mishra have adopted vocal music. Pt. Ram Narain of Udaipur imparted lessons in Sarod playing to his son, instead of nurturing his own tradition. The state of affairs should be an eye opener. Ironically, we are yet to hear a single female artist associated with Sarangi playing. One might disagree with the criticism against Sarangi but it is difficult to disagree even with the critics who assert that during the next five to ten years, when the present generation of Sarangi players passes away there may be a real problem to find substitute accompanist or Sarangi artist. Every passing moment is making the irreparable loss inevitable. In fact Sarangi and its players were never so relevant and meaningful as in the present context. Even the leading institutions of Music, Universities, have no provision and plan for teaching Sarangi playing. In several syllabi there is no mention of Sarangi playing. Even where the syllabi for instrumental music includes Sarangi neither teachers nor students are available. The

vicious circle has to be broken. The artists like Pt. Ram Narayan commanding highest esteem in India and abroad can inspire the younger generation. Incentive to the students and teachers, scholarships, socio economic security of the artists deserve attention on priority basis. The Sarangi players, students coming out after successful completion of training have to be ensured smooth and dignified living and avenues of employment. The instrument must be preserved at all cost. Sangeet Natak Akademies and other institutions devoted to music can play an important role. It is our sacred duty to see that Sarangi, one of the richest instruments, is not allowed to slip out from the hands of the artist to the museum and lap of history.